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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001863

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER BG

SUBJECT: SCA DAS GASTRIGHT MEETING WITH SHEIKH HASINA

Classified By: P/E Counselor D.C. McCullough, reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Opposition Awami League (AL) president Sheikh Hasina expressed concern over the lack of movement on investigating or prosecuting JMB and JMJB suspects, and reiterated her call for international investigation of terrorist incidents in Bangladesh. She also urged the international community to interrogate JMB leaders Shaikh Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai. DAS Gastright praised Hasina's "statesmanship" in returning to Parliament, and urged AL leaders to move forward on forming the proposed election reform committee. Hasina indicated agreement on participating in the committee but said a deadline is necessary to ensure that reforms are in place well before the caretaker government takes charge in October. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On March 31, SCA Deputy Assistant Secretary John Gastright met with Awami League president Sheikh Hasina. AL SYG Abdul Jalil, Hasina's Political Secretary, Saber Hussain Chowdhury, and other AL officials, along with Charge and econoff (notetaker), were also present.

¶3. (C) Hasina complained that the BDG is coasting on its recent arrests of Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB) leaders, and that it has failed to take any steps to investigate the links between terrorist groups like JMB and members of the ruling coalition. Saber Chowdhury stated that the BDG was only looking at HUJI-B and JMB, and was not interested in other terrorist and fundamentalist groups operating in Bangladesh. Even JMB and HUJI-B, he predicted, will return under different names and with new tactics before the elections. By arresting a few JMB leaders, he implied, the BDG was trying to defuse terrorism as a political issue. Hasina asked for UN and Interpol investigations of all terrorist acts in Bangladesh, especially the August 21, 2004, attack on the AL rally in Dhaka. DAS Gastright and Charge agreed on the need for timely terrorist investigations and prosecutions, but stressed that the USG must respect the sovereignty of Bangladesh and could not interfere in the judicial or investigative process absent BDG requests for assistance.

¶4. (C) When asked about progress on forming the election reform committee, Hasina noted that she had received a letter from PM Zia asking for names of committee members from the 14-party alliance. She acknowledged that the decision to allow non-MPs to participate is positive since it would members of her coalition who are not represented in Parliament to participate. However, she argued that BNP efforts on the committee were insincere since PM Zia and others within the government continue to publicly reject the key AL reform proposals. Hasina also objected to the letter's request for participant names from the AL did not

include the names of proposed participants for the ruling coalition. Hasina said that although she has drawn up the list of her participants, she will not submit them before receiving the ruling coalition names. (Note: AL leaders publicly stated on April 1 that they would not accept Jamaat Islami and other "anti-Liberation" members on the committee.)

¶ 15. (C) Saber added that, in a recent BBC political forum, Minister of Communications Nazmul Huda said that election reforms would be left up to the caretaker government, which seems to undercut the rationale for a reform committee. Hasina said that BNP would drag the reform process until October to make sure that no reform proposals are implemented. She reiterated that AL will only participate in the reform committee on the condition that a deadline is set for accepting and implementing reforms well before the caretaker government takes office in October.

¶ 16. (C) AL leaders, when asked about participating in the elections, said that they are committed to the democratic process, and see free and fair elections as the only legitimate way to assume power. They expressed doubt, however, that the AL would be afforded the opportunity to contest the elections freely and fairly. Saber said that AL is not looking for handouts or unfair electoral advantages. "We are merely asking for a reasonable chance to win the elections through a reasonable opportunity to take our agenda to the people." Hasina said that there is no point in contesting the elections when BNP had predetermined the outcome and that participation would merely legitimize a rigged election. The new voter list being prepared by the Election Commission, she said, is a farce orchestrated with the help of Jamaat Islami's student wing, Shibir. DAS Gastright reiterated the need to participate in the reform

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committee and in the elections to ensure that the democratic process continues to develop in Bangladesh.

¶ 17. (C) Charge asked Hasina about her son's return to Bangladesh. Hasina said that her U.S.-based son Joy would be in Bangladesh for the elections to support the AL but he would not run for Parliament. She expects him to run for office someday, but he is not ready to join Bangladeshi politics yet. She claimed, though, that many AL activists are calling for Joy's candidacy in the upcoming elections.

¶ 18. (U) This cable was cleared by DAS Gastright.
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